

Rescuers search for quake survivors in Christchurch, New Zealand

News

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New York, February 23 (ENInews)--Rescue teams in Christchurch, New Zealand were digging through rubble on 23 February, searching for survivors of the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that killed at least 75 people and destroyed and damaged many buildings in the city on 21 February, among them a number of historic churches.

The death toll on the second day after the quake was expected to rise, with hundreds trapped and thousands injured, authorities said. Water and electricity service was out in large areas of the city and police imposed a nighttime curfew, according to press reports

The quake was an aftershock of a 7.1-magnitude quake that hit the city in September, but did not cause as much devastation. Churches were among the most severely affected buildings in the latest quake.

The Anglican ChristChurch Cathedral, a downtown landmark, lost half its tower. Cathedral Dean Peter Beck spoke about the human toll. "It is devastating about the cathedral, but the most important thing at the moment is not the buildings, it's the people, and we've got to reach out to each other here in Christchurch and Canterbury and do what we can to deal with those who are wounded, those who have been killed and their families," he said, in a report carried by the Adelaide, Australia newspaper, The Advertiser.

A story on the diocesan website (www.anglicantaonga.org.nz.) quoted Beck as saying he feared that visitors who were touring the cathedral tower died when it collapsed. "We are very fearful that there are some people under that rubble," he said. The diocese also posted a photo gallery of damaged churches (www.chch.anglican.org.nz).

Bishop Victoria Matthews, of the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch, told New Zealand radio (www.radionz.co.nz) just after the quake that her staff got out of their office building safely, but saw the building across the street collapse. "I saw a lot of people who looked absolutely terrified," she said. In response to a question, she said that her home had been damaged in September and now sustained more damage.

A story on the cathedral website said Matthews called the situation "a crisis of an entirely greater order of magnitude." The story said that during one evening, she was in a tent city set up in Hagley Park. She watched and talked with people as hundreds inched forward, in the rain, towards shelter, said the article.

Matthews said one of her top priorities was to find a church "preferably with running water" that is safe, and which can become the nerve centre for a diocesan relief and pastoral effort.

"I want to open that up 24/7 as place where people can come and pray and receive pastoral care – and a place which clergy can use as a base to go out into the highways and byways to offer pastoral care," she said.

Photographs in New Zealand and Australian media showed that half of the stone facade of Rose Historic Rose Chapel had collapsed into the building, leaving a huge hole. Other churches that also sustained earthquake damage were Knox Presbyterian Church, which lost its windows and much of its walls; Chinese Methodist Church; Oxford Terrace Baptist Church; St. Luke's Anglican Church and Holy Trinity Church in Lyttelton, near the earthquake's epicentre.

At Christchurch Catholic Cathedral, administrator Monsignor Charles Drennan said engineers fear it cannot be saved. The church suffered damage to two bell towers, bringing much of the front facade down with it, according to the report in The Advertiser. The cathedral's main dome also has major cracking, while stained glass windows were also in ruins.

Religious leaders across the world asked for prayers for the victims of the quake.